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# A Reader: Protests and Public Relations

November 18, 2008 in [The Five-List Plan](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [5 comments](#)

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This morning the *Los Angeles Times* reported on [a riot in Gansu](#) that was touched off over disagreements on city planning issues. The report comes on the heels of an uptick in news in the last week on local protests in China. It is unclear if this increased coverage represents an actual increase in local protests (based on reports from the Chinese government in recent years, there are hundreds of local protests each week in China) or if the economic crisis has simply increased the relevance of these protests.

But much of the coverage we've been reading has been less concerned with how representative these protests are; rather China watchers are focusing on what the government's response to both protestors and media coverage tells us about a new CCP public relations attitude. Below, a selection of recent reports.

1. The event that has drawn the most attention in recent weeks has been the taxi driver strikes in several major cities. Xujun Eberlein reported on [the strike in her hometown of Chongqing](#) at *New America Media*:

"In the early morning hours of Monday, November 3rd, however, passengers in Chongqing waiting to go to work by cab were the first to discover them missing from the streets. At the same time, some drivers unaware of the strike, were stopped by their colleagues. Tempers flared, and some 20 to 30 cabs had their top lights smashed, according to reports.

"Within hours, several national outlets of the official media, such as *China Daily* ([China Daily](#)), Xinhuanet.com, and People.com.cn, published the first eyewitness reports, which included interviews with taxi drivers and customers alike. The frankness of those reports surprised me.

"While it was good to see a refreshing departure from the familiar bureaucratic style of official news, the real journalism approach was certainly not as widespread as I would have liked. On the same day, another official agency, *China News*, published a curt and rigid briefing of the situation, in the usual manner that conceals as much bad news as possible. It opens with a description of the all-city strike as 'a partial number of taxis that met with obstruction and were unable to operate normally.' It ends with the conclusion that 'by 4 pm of [November] 3rd, 1,000 taxies had resumed operation,' with no mention that the total number of taxies on strike was about 9,000. The strike, in fact, went on for another day, through Tuesday. It was not until Wednesday morning that the government announced the full resumption of normal operation of all taxies."

2. As Eberlein notes in her report, one of the remarkable bits about the strike was its peaceful end—including mediation and negotiation from the local government. *The Economist*, too, emphasized [the government's apparent soft touch](#) in this case:

"To assuage them, Chongqing's Communist Party chief, Bo Xilai, a Politburo member, held a meeting with strikers. Even more unusually, he allowed live coverage of the event, though by then most drivers had returned to work. In Sanya the acting mayor apologised to the drivers, but the strike dragged on into November 13th. The drivers in Gansu agreed to end their strike after the authorities promised to crack down on unlicensed taxis."

3. As *Bloomberg* reports (quoting *China Beat*'s Jeff Wasserstrom), this tack represents [a new direction in public relations](#) for the Chinese government (in large part, the piece asserts, as a result of citizens' ability to trade information online):

"Disgruntled taxi drivers in Chongqing air their complaints following a two-day strike while a top official of the southwestern Chinese city nods intently.

"You spoke really well, thank you," says [Bo Xilai](#), the Communist Party chief, complimenting a participant who talked with a thick regional accent. 'I was able to understand 90 percent of what you said.'

"The three-hour meeting, available [online](#) across China through major Web portals, is more reminiscent of local government access in the U.S. than in a country where protests have typically met with swift repression.

"As Chinese citizens increasingly use the Internet to get news, [share videos](#), vent frustrations and expose abuses of power, leaders are being forced to react publicly to their concerns. Government officials are also adapting traditional media-control techniques to the information age — including sending out press releases and approved articles on topics that once would have been completely suppressed.

"They've learned that they come off looking better if they're somewhat more transparent, somewhat quicker to respond," says [Jeffrey Wasserstrom](#), a professor at the University of California, Irvine who has studied protest in China. 'They're learning spin control.'"

4. In addition to more open dealings with disgruntled citizens, however, [China Media Project](#) [writes](#) that the media coverage of the taxi strikes also points to the Chinese government's ~~increasing willingness to allow open reporting~~ shifting management of media:

"The important thing to recognize first of all is that the issues underlying these taxi strikes are not newly emerging, nor are they news to party officials. But the handling of these incidents reveals some interesting trends (and inconsistencies) in China's press control policy...One of the key characteristics of Control 2.0 is the active setting of the agenda through rapid but selective news coverage by critical state media such as Xinhua News Agency, China Central Television and *People's Daily*. This is what Hu Jintao meant when he said in June that the media needs to "actively set the agenda" (主动设置议题)."

5. For a more alarmist take on this topic, see [The New Republic's piece today](#), subtitled, "How the global economic crisis could bring down the Chinese government." Author Joshua Kurlantzick here makes the claim that "as the economy turns sour, protest is rising," though, again, it isn't clear to us if there has *actually* been an increase or if Western media has simply been reporting more regularly on Chinese protests because their narrative now fits with the international story of the global economic downturn (rather than protests over localized issues in China):

"Normally, the Pearl River Delta, a manufacturing hub in southern China, whirs with the sound of commerce. Alongside massive new highways, clusters of factories churn out toys, electronics, and other consumer products for the world; in Pearl River cities like Guangzhou, nouveau riche businesspeople cut deals at swank hotels.

"But in recent months, the Delta has started to seem more like Allentown, circa 1980s. As the global financial crisis hits Western consumers' wallets, orders for the Delta's products have dried up. And angry factory workers, many owed back pay, have taken to the streets. In one recent incident, some 300 suppliers and creditors "descended on the River Dragon complex [a factory where the owners vanished] looting warehouses in the hopes of salvaging something," As USA Today [reported](#).

"This unrest is likely to spiral. As the Chinese economy sours for the first time in years, the government this week announced a [\\$586 billion stimulus package](#). But in some ways, much more is at stake: While, in the U.S., a financial failure would simply mean another dent in George W. Bush's reputation, in China it could mean the breakdown of the entire political order."

**Tags:** [Gansu](#), [protest](#), [riot](#), [taxi](#)